

Responding to Tragedy: Operation NOBLE EAGLE



by Letha Cozart
Editor

On September 11, 2001, New York's World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon were attacked by terrorists — hijackers who commandeered civilian passenger planes in their war against the United States, crashing them into the buildings. Air Force civil engineers were part of the rapid response that followed — rescuing survivors, fighting fires, running logistics supply points and equipment staging areas at “Ground Zero” in Manhattan, hardening bases and preparing for a U.S. military response at locations worldwide.

Civil engineers attached to the 10 fighter wings assigned to First Air Force (Air National Guard) scrambled to support flying operations as their wings were activated to fly combat air patrol over U.S. cities. On active duty bases across the country, firefighters, EOD specialists, and the power production personnel who operate and maintain aircraft arresting barriers supported launch and recovery of sorties during the immediate post-disaster alert.

The Air Force Civil Engineer Support Agency at Tyndall Air Force Base, FL, activated the CE Readiness Operations

Center, providing around-the-clock readiness, operations, explosive ordnance disposal, fire protection and Air Force Contract Augmentation Program (AFCAP) support to the Crisis Action Team cells at the Air Staff and major commands. Meanwhile, the defense posture was ratcheted up at U.S. military bases worldwide. Increased force protection measures required civil engineers to install restrictive barriers at various locations on bases and assist with non-combatant evacuation operations overseas.

The Department of Defense response to the crisis was named Operation NOBLE EAGLE. As the homeland defense and civil support operation began, civil engineers went to work helping wherever needed.

Among those helping at Ground Zero, the site of the collapsed World Trade Center towers, were personnel from New York's five Air National Guard civil engineer squadrons: the 105th CES, Stewart Air National Guard Base, Newburgh; the 106th CES, Francis S. Gabreski Airport, Westhampton Beach; the 107th CES, Niagara Falls; the 109th CES, Stratton Air Guard Base, Scotia; and the 174th CES, Syracuse.

“It was a collective effort,” said Maj Earl Evans, 174th Fighter Wing Base Civil Engineer. “We had engineers from the five Air Guard bases in New York. The work that we did differed, there was some engineering work and some logistics work. A big part of our operation for the first week and a half or so was running logistics supply points and equipment staging areas around Ground Zero.

FBI agents, firefighters, rescue workers and engineers work at the Pentagon crash site on Sept. 14, 2001, where a hijacked American Airlines flight slammed into the building three days before. The terrorist attack caused extensive damage to the west face of the building and followed similar attacks on the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. (DoD photo by TSgt Cedric H. Rudisill)

“We worked with the New York Housing Authority in distributing and controlling items such as small generators and government trucks. We assisted the Army National Guard in setting up a sort of central warehouse facility, collecting stock from drop off points all over the city, setting it up, cataloging and distributing it. There were also smaller tasks — putting up tents where they were needed and building wood crates for the fire department.”

“A lot of the expedient-type construction done was in support of the New York City Mayor’s Office of Emergency Management,” said Maj Jesus Figueroa, 106th Civil Engineer Squadron commander. “We also did a lot of force protection, augmenting the Army National Guard in providing resource protection throughout the Ground Zero location. We also supported the city, on the environmental



New York City construction crews remove debris and large structural beams from Ground Zero during recovery operations. (Photo by MSgt Ed MacNabb)



TSgt Nick Marchisello, an Air Force Reservist with the 514th CES and New Jersey firefighter, awaits the order to enter the rubble of the North Tower of the World Trade Center. (Photo by Capt Jim Fabio)

side, in brainstorming expedient ways of accomplishing decontamination procedures for the troops coming out of the Ground Zero area.”

Another mission for the CEs was finding a location where all the deployed Guard troops could be bedded down.

“For the first week and a half or so they were at armories, they were at Fort Hamilton, they were kind of all over the city,” said Evans. “Then we worked out a deal with the Coast Guard to use Governor’s Island. They were hesitant at first because the buildings on the base had been shut down for the last few years — it’s basically a pickled base,” said Evans. The Coast Guard had closed their base on Governor’s Island, a 172-acre island in New York harbor, in 1997.

“We worked with the Coast Guard to get access to some of the old apartment buildings and the dining hall,” said Evans. “Then a combined team of Prime BEEF personnel from all five New York ANG units went in and re-commissioned them.

“When I left the site recently, they had opened a 99-



Plans and programs specialist Adam Buehler of the 305th CES, McGuire AFB, NJ, monitors the Disaster Control Group in the Emergency Operations Center and talks with squadron representatives from the medical, logistics, operations and support groups after the terrorist attacks Sept. 11. The DCG is responsible for pulling together the resources of the base to serve as the backbone of emergency incidents. (Photo by Scott H. Spitzer)

apartment building and were using about 75 of the apartments. The other 24 apartments had to be condemned because of roof leaks and things like that. We’ve also opened two 11-apartment buildings and the dining hall.

“We also have firefighters on the island. There is a very small federal fire department on Governor’s Island to protect



New York Air National Guard personnel off-load tent parts as they begin setting up a base camp for the Army on Randall's Island, New York City. The effort was abandoned when it was discovered that the site was a capped landfill and the stakes could not be set in far enough to maintain the tents. (Photo by MSgt Ed MacNabb)



Personnel from the 174th CES, 109th CES and Det. 1 (ANG GSU) from Fort Drum, NY, return from their first 12-hour night of "security" detail for the Ground Zero area. (Photo by MSgt Ed MacNabb)



188th Fighter Wing, Arkansas Air National Guard, civil engineers deliver concrete barriers to the front gate at Fort Smith shortly after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. (Photo by SMSgt Dennis L Brambl)



51st CES "Mongrels" connect wires for a generator used during the off-base housing evacuation to Osan Air Base, Republic of Korea, Sept. 12, 2001, following the attacks on the United States. (Photo by SSgt George F. Thompson, Jr.)

the resources out there, but because no one lives on the island except for one caretaker, they aren't manned for rescue. Part of the agreement we made with the Coast Guard was that we would provide eight firefighters to augment the Governor's Island fire department. They are providing structural firefighting capability for the occupied buildings there," said Evans.

Major Evans said civil engineer and services personnel will perform support functions on the island for as long as the operation lasts. "We're thinking it will last from six to 12 months, and we're looking at a steady population of about 1,100 Guard troops," he said.

Meanwhile, workers and volunteers continue in their unlikely task of securing and clearing a "war zone" on American soil.

"It was a valuable experience for our people because it was the closest you could get to war, in the sense of not

actually fighting it but feeling the effects of it," said Figueroa. "Especially because it was in our homeland, there was a lot of stress and what we call combat fatigue, even though we weren't in combat. The adrenalin and the tension were so high that people didn't sleep well. There were a lot of obstacles to overcome, but we did our best."